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AUTHOR Spaulding, Irving A.
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ABSTRACT

A course designed to teach rural sociology to urban and suburban university students is described in this paper. Introductory material sets forth the objectives and the conceptual approach of the course, which systematically examines social changes associated with food and fiber production throughout the world. Five concepts--group, imperative functions, society, operations, and status--are identified as critical for interpreting the subject matter of the course. The major portion of the paper summarizes the seven subject matter units. Units 1 and 2 present a global view of food and fiber production and social and economic changes affecting it. Units 3, 4, and 5 focus on the United States and the topics of establishing status in the power structure for farmers, the effects of inter-locality exchange systems, and the impact of agribusiness and its associated social structure. Unit 6 allows for discussion and speculation about the future of national and world-wide production of food and fiber. Unit 7 considers rural sociology as an academic discipline and rural sociologist as an occupation. A three-page list of references concludes the document. (JHZ)

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TEACHING RURAL SOCIOLOGY TO STUDENTS
WITH NON-RURAL BACKGROUNDS *

By

Irving A. Spaulding
University of Rhode Island
August 1986

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Teaching Rural Sociology to Students
with Non-rural Backgrounds*

Irving A. Spaulding
University of Rhode Island



The audience and task

Teaching rural sociology at the University of Rhode Island to students with urban and suburban backgrounds has prompted me to experiment with ways to reach that audience whose experience with things "rural" has, for the most part, been casual. The following comments are about an approach which has been useful because of its conceptual systematization, its scope, and the flexibility with which it can be used for varying class interests without moving outside the bounds of that systematization. The approach is a functional one which systematizes social changes in, and impinging on, operations associated with "food and fiber" throughout the world.

The approach has been useful in efforts to meet a set of instructional objectives which can be specified as follows:

1. To develop in students an appreciation of:
 - a. food and fiber operations as an essential aspect of achievements in a society;
 - b. food and fiber production as a business;
 - c. social and geographic conditions under which food and fiber are produced in their society;
 - d. social change which has led, historically, to current conditions associated with food and fiber production;
 - e. the potential future of food and fiber production.
2. To introduce students to academic and occupational aspects of rural sociology and rural sociologists.

The approach

Use is made of the "traditional" subject matter of rural sociology and of complementary information. This subject matter has been organized in seven instructional units each of which is interpreted within a framework of functional concepts, rather than within the framework of extant definitions of "rural" (and of "urban"); in fact, the significance of those definitions can be seen in the context of the functional concepts, with which attention is focused on "the production of food and fiber" and attendant exchange operations. With this approach is it possible to view all components of a society as having functionally meaningful relationships to each other within the same context. Development of the approach has entailed problems of reconciling concepts and of reconciling relationships between concepts and evidence. With its use, one finds that familiar information is occasionally placed in an unfamiliar, but functionally appropriate, context.

Five concepts are critical for consideration of evidence and functional relationships:

1. Group: a combination of people participating in mutually coordinated activity. (Four indispensable processes occurring within a group are mobility, transportation, communication, and exchange.)
2. Imperative functions: the achievements which have to be accomplished if a group is going to exist, be viable, and survive as a "society."¹
3. Society: a group whose members share in contributing to the achievement of imperative functions and share in the consequences of those achievements.
4. Operations: activities with which contributions are made to the achievement of imperative functions.

5. Status: position in the power structure of a group associated with differences in the power and operations of group members.

Additional concepts are used when appropriate for the subject matter under consideration.

Subject matter units

The seven subject matter units and comment about each follow. The first two establish breadth of perspective, the next three focus on the United States, and the last two return to breadth of perspective. Only major points relevant to each are mentioned; the result is a seeming over-simplification.

Unit I. - The Production of Food and Fiber; Environment and Technique as Bases for a "Way of Life."

This unit is based on information about various techniques by which "food and fiber" become available to people and the implications of those techniques for survival and group structure. Recognition is given to gathering, hunting, fishing, nomadism, agriculture, and aquaculture as historical and contemporary techniques. The information provides a basis for considering occupational, environmental, and cultural-community concepts of "rural."

Unit II. - Impinging Trends of Change

This unit is based on information about four historical trends of change taking place throughout the world and impinging on operations associated with "food and fiber." These are: 1. an increase throughout the world of wealth in forms other than land used for agriculture; 2. commercialization and the establishment of commercial exchange systems within and among emergent nations; 3. the creation of social organization (systems of groups) reflecting functions and power associated directly or indirectly with commercial exchange operations; 4. the origin and use of techniques for contributing to the

achievement of imperative functions which have also contributed to establishment and maintenance of status in the power structure associated with commercial exchange operations.

Unit III. - Establishing Status for United States' Farmers

This unit is based on information about development, in the United States, of power structure based on non-agricultural wealth, associated with commercial inter-locality exchange operations, and farmers' efforts to acquire and maintain status within it. Part A pertains to the acquisition and settlement of land, the promotion of agriculture, and the development of power structure based on non-agricultural wealth located within national territory. Part B pertains to farmers' efforts to secure stability of status within that power structure.

Part A. Germane here is information about four major trends of change. One is the acquisition of land by the United States' government. This was accomplished in a variety of ways. Consideration is given to the allocation of land to the newly established federal government by former colonies, to land purchases, to land acquisition by treaty, negotiation, war, and threat of war. Figuring largely in these events were the French, Spanish, English, Canadians, Mexicans, Texans, Russians, and Native Americans.

The second trend is the settlement of the land. Germane to this are five associated influences. One was a common interest in commerce shared by the federal government and by private enterprise. A second was the existence of people to whom ownership and operation of a farm as a family enterprise was the realization of ultimate aspiration. A third was the existence of people attracted by newly discovered mineral resources. A fourth was people who would

carry out the functions of "infrastructure." The fifth was people interested in political power and issues associated with statehood as well as political, religious, and personal freedoms.

The third trend was the promotion of agriculture. Food and fiber were to be produced for international trade and for expanding food and fiber industries as well as to feed and clothe an expanding population and its armies. In the interests of commerce, to which agricultural products were important, the federal government subsidized and or encouraged the construction of canals, highways, and railroads. It contributed through the sale of land and through provisions for homesteading; it provided the basis for establishing colleges of agriculture (and mechanic arts). Also in the interest of commerce, private enterprise promoted agriculture. For example, wheat production on the "bonanza" farms of the Dakotas was undertaken and promoted by a railroad company which had incurred financial losses during an interval of economic depression and was attempting to recover from those losses. In the interests of having goods to transport, railroads promoted the immigration of Europeans with agricultural backgrounds to occupy land and farm it. The cotton textile industry flourished, and meat processing, for example, became an industrial business. The invention of machines to facilitate the production and processing of agricultural products was prolific.

The fourth trend was the discovery, acquisition, and use of valuable non-agricultural resources; oil and varieties of minerals figured importantly among these. Private enterprise contributed greatly to these changes. Industrial use of non-agricultural resources flourished as did associated commercial transportation, communication, and financial operations, all facilitated by the invention of appropriate machinery. People who ventured exceptionally well in these activities became, during the late 1800's, a new

economic elite with secure upper positions in the power structure based on non-agricultural wealth, while positions lower in that power structure remained open for competitive acquisition.

However, by the end of the 1800's, there was alteration in the course of events associated with land acquisition, settlement, and change in power structure. By 1890, there was no more federal land available for homesteading; the frontier was closed. By 1895 the relative security of the economic elite was reflected in the origin of the National Association of Manufacturers. But instability of status was characteristic of farmers, as the power structure developed around accumulations of non-agricultural wealth, and would continue to be characteristic of them. As participation in commercial inter-locality exchange systems associated with this power structure has become increasingly prevalent, increasing number of farmers have come "under pressure" to produce commercially exchangeable produce of adequate quantity, quality, and value to enable them to operate their farms as businesses and to experience security of status.

The transition involves conditions in which status criteria are bifurcated. On the one hand are criteria which pertain to established localism; on the other hand are criteria which pertain to the power structure associated with inter-locality commercial exchange.

Part B. This part is based on information pertaining to efforts made by producers of food and fiber to achieve and maintain status in the power structure associated with non-agricultural wealth and exchange operations. Critical in these efforts are concerns about keeping financially solvent and making a profit from farming operations. These efforts are undertaken under conditions of high risk. Risks are implicit in the conditions of nature --- floods, droughts, extremes of temperature, devastating storms, epidemics of

disease, and infestations of pests; unprocessed products are highly perishable. Risks are also implicit in social conditions --- the vagaries of markets, of prices, of costs, the prevalence and availability of money as well as its value, and the availability of credit.

Farmers' efforts to achieve and maintain status under these conditions can be classified under two headings; one pertains to farm management while the second pertains to collective action. Consideration is given to management practices associated with increased production, to specialization, and to contract farming. Equal consideration can be given to financial aspects of farm management. However, these practices are viewed as efforts to participate with enhanced surety in the commercial inter-locality exchange operations to a degree which provides stability of status in the power structure associated with those exchange systems.

Collective action is viewed as occurring in association with two social conditions. One embraces intervals of economic depression; during these intervals, reduced income has been a threat to farmers' status or has resulted in their loss of status. The second embodies intervals during which farmers felt that decisions made in power structure positions higher than their own were affecting them adversely. Pertinent here are, for example, issues of taxation, of compliance with law, and of discriminating freight rates charged by railroads.

Three types of response to adverse social conditions have occurred. One has been working through existing governmental and economic institutions to influence the exercise of power. A second has been efforts to strengthen their position in the power structure by establishing and operating their own

organizations. A third has been protest expressed not only through existing governmental and economic institutions and farmers' organizations but also in direct violence against people and property.

With respect to working through existing institutions, efforts to work through governmental structures have entailed taking over governmental power through democratic processes and/or working politically with existing parties and vested interests to secure enactment of regulations which would contribute to the security of their own status. Efforts to work through economic institutions have entailed negotiation with agencies engaged in private enterprise for prices, for access to markets, and for credit. Participation has been that of individual farmers and/or farmers' organizations.

Diversity has characterized farmers' organizations, regardless of whether they were local, state, or national in scope. Emphasis on programs of social activities in local chapters has varied. Educational programs have been widely prevalent. Economic programs have varied. Some have, for example, advocated farmers' control of production, purchasing, transportation, financing, processing, and marketing of all products; others have advocated cooperative buying, processing, and marketing by producers of a given product. Political programs have varied from those advocating formulation of political parties to those advocating coalitions and support of candidates favorable to their causes. Lobbying among legislators is undertaken by some farmers' organizations. And some have advocated direct action and violence.

The direct action of farmers and some of their organizations has included events such as intimidation of people and the burning of property by "night-riders," removing fluid milk from private vehicles as it was being delivered to local markets and dumping it at a roadside, stopping farm foreclosure sales by threat, "bidding-in" a farmer's livestock and equipment

for pennies rather than dollars at a foreclosure auction and returning them to him, and personal harrassment, at least, of tax collectors, veterinarians, judges, and bankers, as well as some effigy hangings of public figures. Some farmers have shot family members before committing suicide; others have disposed of themselves only. But, these direct actions against self, neighbor, representatives of business firms, and representatives of government have been part of farmers' response to threats of loss, and to actual loss, of status.

The most extensive and most successful effort to ensure the status of farmers under adverse conditions was enacted by the federal government during the great depression of the 1930's. It had federally operated programs for control of production, for price support, for low-cost credit, for regulating marketing, and for resource conservation. Those programs have been modified extensively under the impact of increasing affluence which has developed since that interval of severe economic adversity.

All told, these efforts on the part of farmers and their organizations have never given farmers a guarantee of more than temporarily stable status in the power structure of commercial exchange operations. The prevailing openness of competition for middle-range positions in that power structure is an aspect of the society's characteristics in which producers of food and fiber currently participate as they have in the past. Those whose primary commercial asset is land used for agriculture find that this land provides them limited flexibility for use in the give and take of bargaining for power in the commercial exchange systems.

However, some utopian and ethno-religious groups, committed to maintaining a distinctive way of life associated closely with the land, have resisted involvement in commercial inter-locality exchange systems to varying degrees. Three cases illustrate varying orientations to that involvement and varying

degrees of avoiding it. These cases are of the Oneida Colony, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and the Old Order Amish. The former started as an agricultural commune under religious symbolism and changed, under the influence of outside involvements, to a joint-stock company without major agricultural interests. The second has demonstrated a high degree of adaptability and remains vigorously active. The third has demonstrated persistent resistance to interference with the Amish way of life, minimizing the effects of outside influences with which members are confronted; how long this resistance can be sustained is a matter of conjecture.

A comparison of these groupings, when established as locality settlements, and the type of rural community shown by research to be widely prevalent in the United States suggests that commercialization and inter-locality exchange have constantly been closely associated with community life for many producers of food and fiber. The extent to which those characteristics have been present has varied from location to location at a given time and from time to time at a given location.

Unit IV. - Impacts on Localism

This unit is based on information pertinent to impacts on localism ensuing from the spread of inter-locality exchange systems throughout the world. Of particular concern is the impact of participation in those exchange operations on producers of food and fiber in relatively isolated settlements with locally oriented exchange systems. Emphasis is on examination of community studies in the United States and on complementary information.

Given the availability of mobility, transportation, and communication between and among localities, the development of inter-locality exchange systems contributes to four relationships among locality settlements. These are: 1. increased dependency of localities upon each other; 2. characteristics

of non-local origin present in each locality; 3. agencies and personnel from other localities present in each; 4. specialization in dominant functions and operations in each locality which contributes to their exchange operations and establishes status (power) variations and relationships among them.

From technological changes expanding the scope of transportation and communication in the United States has ensued a dispersion of people's activities between and among existing connected, and often adjacent, "uni-place" localities, exemplified by the traditionally prevalent rural community of farmers surrounding a trade center which was the focus of exchange activities both within the community and with other communities. The result has been a transformation in "community" among producers of food and fiber from that of prevalent "uni-place" locality settlements toward that of "multi-place" settlements within which there are "places" of specialized function related to others through routines of mobility and exchange.

This change in locality settlements has been contingent upon two factors. One embodies both the implementation of social policy and investment related to the production of technology for transportation and communication; the second has been the establishment of inter-locality exchange systems which have made that technology available to increasing proportions of the nation's population. These factors have produced two contrasting but mutually dependent types of locality settlement, both having "multi-place" characteristics. For one type, policy and investment have generated opportunity for geographic concentrations of people to perform inter-locality exchange operations contributing to the achievement of imperative functions and associated with "urbanization" on a scale buttressed by increasing national population and international exchange. For the other type, policy and investment have generated efficiencies in the production of food and fiber and a decrease in

population. Their specializations make the two types mutually dependent, granting the existence of a wide range of variation within each type which makes all of them dependent upon each other in their exchange operations.

This perspective on similarity between and among locality settlements having different dominant functions, different numbers of people, and different densities of population allows for consideration of a diverse arrangement of information. It is in this context that demographic definitions of "rural" and "urban" take on significance. Pertinent here is information about geographic regions and their characteristics of localism; variations in the social organization of farms --- plantations, ranches, family farms --- considered according to region, products, proximity to markets; rural community studies; rural-urban differences; rural-urban and urban-rural migration; decentralization of industry; recreational use of rural areas and national parks; urban territorial expansion and changes in land use; part-time farming; farm labor; the location of shopping malls, housing developments, and condominiums; community satisfaction; the impact of urban-industrial and agricultural pollution on people and resources of given areas; demographic characteristics of localities. This list is not exhaustive; topics considered and the extent of their use can be matters of instructor discretion.

Unit V. - Agri-business in the United States

This unit is based on information pertaining to the concept "agri-business" and the social structure associated with it in the United States. Agri-business is defined as all operations associated with the production, transportation, storage, processing, distribution, and marketing of food and fiber. Then consideration is given to the social structure associated with the transition of an agricultural product from being a "raw material" to being a consumed commodity.

Among aspects of agri-business considered can be the number and diversity of farms; corporate and entrepreneurial structures associated with the transportation, storage, processing, distribution, and marketing of food and fiber. Also relevant are the corporate and entrepreneurial structures associated with equipment for farm homes and buildings, farm machinery, livestock and poultry feeds, pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, and kindred aids to production. In addition, social structure associated with banking, insurance, and import/export operations, as well as those of commodity exchanges, can be considered. Also appropriate is the communication industry for which people who are producers of food and fiber, as well as others, are audience, spectators, or readers. Finally, consideration can be given to the relationship of government, as the ultimate secular authority in a society, to all these operations and their support structures.

The evidence provides students with perspective on the scope and impact of influence which the production of food and fiber has on a society.

Unit VI. - The Future of Food and Fiber

This unit allows for discussion and speculation about the future of national and world-wide production of food and fiber. Students are encouraged to think about the topic in terms of the significance of inter-locality commercial exchange systems.

Unit VII. - Rural Sociology and Rural Sociologists

This unit is allocated to consideration of disciplinary and occupational characteristics of rural sociology and rural sociologists. As an academic discipline, rural sociology is viewed as a specialization within a broader field of social science. Its specific concern is with scientific generalizations pertinent to the operation of the "rural" components of a society in the context of that society. As an occupation, rural sociology is

viewed as closely associated with teaching, research (most of which has an applied cast), and public service; land grant colleges, agricultural experiment stations, the Cooperative Extension Service, and government agencies dealing with agriculture and resources are frequent sources of employment. As a discipline and profession, rural sociology has adapted to changing problem situations among rural people and, as a viable discipline, will continue to do so. International in interests and organization, professional societies provide opportunities for collegiality and for professional development.

Experience

For the instructor, there are problems to be experienced in use of this perspective. One set is related to students' familiarity with the social sciences, generally, and with sociology, specifically. The instructor needs to find the level and complexity of discourse useful for communication; these can vary somewhat from class to class. A second set of problems is related to allocations of subject matter and time. During no semester have I touched upon all seven of these units with the thoroughness which could be given them. Adaptations have been made to class experience and interest; accommodations have been made to my own concerns about specific aspects of given topics. And, even though I have found the approach useful for work with students having non-rural backgrounds, I am sure it is but one way to use the subject matter of the discipline.

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Footnote

*The following list of imperative functions has been useful:

1. Securing new members and terminating memberships;
2. Socializing members to conform and handling deviants;
3. Providing essential goods and services for members and handling wastes;
4. Maintaining the physical conditions of members and handling their injuries, illnesses, and physical and emotional limitations;
5. Stabilizing members' positions within the society and providing for members' transitions among positions;
6. Affirming the identity of individual members and of the society;
7. Leading and managing the society;
8. Coping with uncontrolled events.

*A version of this statement was presented at the 1986 meeting of the Rural Sociological Society in Salt Lake City, Utah.